Mental Health and the Gut: Was Hippocrates Right?

It was Hippocrates who first proposed that all disease has a gastrointestinal root. In modern medicine, we like to paraphrase that by saying that 'disease begins in the gut'. But was Hippocrates right? Yes and no is the confusing answer to that question.

As explained in my previous blog/article, scores of studies over the last several generations have identified a link between the brain and the gastrointestinal (GI) system. Even practical experience tells us there is a link. How so? Feeling butterflies in your stomach in the hours leading up to a big presentation is just one example.

As a psychoanalyst, I am very interested in psychosomatic medicine. I believe is a field with a lot of potential. According to psychoanalysis, psychosomatic illness is not imagined illness. Rather, it is illness that has a psychical root. Its existence is undeniable. As such, it is almost certain that mental health and gut health influence one another in multiple ways.

They Don't All Start There

It would be inappropriate to suggest that all diseases begin with some sort of GI disorder. In fact, we know that this is not the case. A person diagnosed with Lyme disease contracted it after being bitten by an insect. So many victims of polio at the start of the 20th century contracted the disease as the result of a virus. (As a psychoanalyst I would be interested in understanding why…some people contracted the disease after being bitten and some…didn't).

Nonetheless, we explored in my previous article how GI disturbances and imbalances can lead to a range of metabolic, cognitive, and autoimmune issues. For example, studies have shown that the brains of patients suffering from GI disorders are more sensitive to pain signals.

The opposite is also true. People experiencing depression, anxiety, or high levels of stress also tend to experience GI tract problems as well. All of this is to say that getting a better handle on mental health can improve gut health and vice-versa.

Maintaining Optimal Health for Both

Given that the mind and GI system are so intrinsically connected, it makes sense to strive for good health in both areas. Good mental health should improve GI health and hence, overall heath. Likewise, a healthy GI tract should help reduce stress, anxiety and improve physical and mental performance.

In terms of mental health, here are some things that can help:

- **Learning to deal with Stress** – Stress is one of the most unhealthy influences in modern life. Learning ways to reduce stress can calm your mind and your GI tract simultaneously.
- **Thinking Positively** – Constant negative thoughts only exacerbate stress and anxiety, leading to neuro-inflammation in the long term (as explained in my previous blog). Training your mind to focus on the positive can go a long way toward improved mental health.
- **Psychotherapy** – Psychotherapy is an extremely helpful tool for improving mental health by helping you cope with stress and thinking positively. You do not have to be diagnosed with a specific mental illness to benefit from it. The way you talk about your life is very important: when you say something different, something different happens.

In terms of GI health, there are some incredibly good suggestions for it as well:

- **Changing the Diet** – First and foremost, the best way to improve GI (and brain) health is to change your diet to include more fibre, omega-3 fatty acids and antioxidants. No gluten nor sugar. A healthy diet is the ultimate goal.
- **Pro- and Prebiotics** – Your gut microbiome is compound by millions of different bacteria. To avoid gut imbalances: avoid taking unnecessary antibiotics and include probiotic foods and supplements if need it.
- **Good Eating Habits** – Believe it or not, there are ways to eat that make it easier for the body to digest food and absorb the nutrients it provides. For example, drinking water (especially cold) during and after meals make digestion more difficult. You might have also realised that… having a fight or a difficult conversation can give you a stomach-ache. Learning those eating habits can improve GI health.

Hippocrates was correct in his belief that the GI system plays a significant role in human health. He may not have understood the link between the GI system, the brain and the mind, but we know about that link today. We know that mental health affects gut health and vice-versa.